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ABSTRACT

Creative dramatics can be used effectively by the elementary teacher to help motivate students to become involved in various language arts activities. Dramatic play, pantomime, story dramatization, imagination exercises, creative movement, improvisation, and other structured activities encourage students to relate new experiences to old. As they increase their range of associations to familiar words and objects, students confront genuine purposes for acquiring the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. (Ten practical applications of activities for teachers are provided.) (NH)

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Enhancing the Language Arts: Using Creative Dramatics

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Enhancing the Language Arts:
Using Creative Dramatics

There are many frustrations with teaching language arts: the mechanics of reading and writing; how to deal with mistakes; finding interesting topics; how to organize for instruction; the fear of failure; how much time to spend on the different components; and more importantly, where to find the extra time. Another frustration is that of providing students with a range of genuine purposes for acquiring the skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Teachers want to motivate students to do well in all areas. We want students to be interested in what they are doing and to become involved in the process. To overcome many of the frustrations found in teaching language arts, we encourage the use of creative dramatics.

What is Creative Dramatics?

Creative dramatics has been around for a long time but is just recently getting the attention it deserves in the classroom. It can include such activities as dramatic play, pantomime, story dramatization, imagination exercises, creative movement, improvisation, and other structured activities that encourage students to relate new experiences to old, increase their range of associations to familiar words and objects and to add to their repertoire of adaptive responses. Creative dramatics encourages and requires students to interact with one another in a nonthreatening learning experience. Involvement in dramatic activities becomes so real, that pretending loses all meaning. Humans beings have an inherent capacity to make believe, imagine, and create situations. Creative dramatics can help children discover and shape their ideas. It is a positive and fulfilling way of learning, a model for education across the curriculum. Creative dramatics has a legitimate and vital educational role to play in the language arts curriculum.

How Can Creative Dramatics Enhance Your Language Arts Curriculum?

Drama can effectively pull together a unit of study by motivating and accelerating learning. You will be able to motivate and stimulate your students by choosing activities according to their interests and abilities. The creative dramatics approach to language arts will encourage your students to think creatively, help them deal with their emotions and tensions, create a positive educational spontaneity and excitement in your classroom, and broaden every student's self-expression. Creative dramatics can be:

* a vehicle to enhance comprehension of various concepts in different subject areas,
* a device for strengthening and accelerating student's language, thought, and action,
* a method by which the teacher can gather information about the interests of students,
* an activity that encourages students to further develop their inherent capacity to create and engage in all the communication skills in a variety of ways,
* a unifying exercise designed to enable both students and teachers to share their experiences and to better understand each others cultural backgrounds (Lehr, 1985).

Schools have tended to use prescriptive models of teaching where the learning outcomes are predetermined according to a curriculum that fails to recognize the importance of providing students with opportunities for manipulating thought and language across contexts that make sense to them (Verriour, 1986). Research suggests that young children convey meaning to others using many different communication systems, and that they use what is

known about one system to support the understanding of another system. This is how children interact with the components of the language arts curriculum. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening must support one another and be integrated rather than be seen and taught as separate entities.

Creative dramatics can be effectively utilized to provide for increased communications and skill development across the entire range of educational levels. Wagner (1988) cites the following studies: Troyha (1973) reported that drama had a significant effect on post-test essays of remedial college students. Ridel (1973) found that ninth graders wrote more original creative stories after dramatic activities. Pellegrini (1984) concluded that drama was significantly correlated with word-writing fluency in Kindergarten aged children and Wagner (1986) found drama to be significantly effective in improving persuasive writing of fourth and eighth graders. Why, then isn't creative dramatics used in every classroom throughout the country? The answer is, that most teachers are not aware of the dramatic effects this approach can have and many feel they do not have time to incorporate another single thing into their curriculums.

How Can You Incorporate Creative Dramatics?

As classroom teachers we tend to be overburdened with the curriculums we teach and do not have time to add one more thing into our day. However, you have probably been using creative dramatics in your classroom already and just didn't call it that. Do the students in your class raise their hands to be recognized? Speaking without using words is a perfect way to introduce pantomime. How else can we communicate without the use of words? Can you say "yes," "no," "stop," "I don't know" or "come here," without words? Share with your class a variety of wordless picture books. For the younger student, explain that we can tell a story through the illustrations. For the older

student, encourage them to write the story to correspond with the illustrations. Compare and contrast the stories written. Divide into small groups and act out or pantomime each story created. Share these creations with a younger grade. Make wordless picture books to display in the school library and encourage others to create texts.

By providing dramatic activities before or after a lesson, you will notice an improvement in topic selection, organization of thoughts both verbal and written, sequencing of events, less fear of failure, and genuine reasons for wanting to become involved in the language arts. As students act out situations presented to them they are able to see, feel, hear, and imagine their thoughts more clearly. Through creative dramatic activities they actually walk through the sequence and plan what will happen next. The topic becomes clearer in their minds, and their imaginations are triggered to create more substantial and fluent writings or prepare for more thought-provoking debates.

Implementing a creative dramatics lesson does not take any more time from your day than a good discussion or lecture used as a preparatory activity. In addition, your students will not be able to "tune you out" when they are actively involved in creative dramatics.

Language arts will flourish in a classroom where students are free to use oral language and creative dramatics to enhance their abilities. With the newest buzz words in education being "whole-language" and "literature-based reading", what better way to tie it all together than by using creative dramatics in your classroom? Students will create from their own experiences, expand their imaginations, and develop finer communication and understanding skills.

Take the time to review the following activities as a springboard for your

own imagination. As you begin to feel more comfortable with using creative dramatics, look in your local library for more information on this subject. Vary the activities you find to meet your own needs and your students' needs. You will be thrilled when you see your students' growth and love of the language arts develop in front of your eyes.

Practical Applications for Teachers

1. CAREERS-- What might you like to be someday?

Talk about what you might like to be when you grow up.

Find magazine articles and pictures of different careers.

Make a "Career Book" individually or as a class project.

Describe your favorite career choices.

Pantomime your career choice and have the class guess what you are.

2. INVENTIONS-- Create something that no one has created before!

Discuss different "real" inventions and how they have changed our lives.

Create a catalog of inventions for a certain time period.

Using classmates as "pieces" make your invention and discuss its uses.

Write a description of your invention. How does it work? Why do we need it? What will it do for us?

3. READ AN UNFAMILIAR STORY-- stop at the climax!

Write an ending and compare it to the real ending.

Act out your favorite scene.

Create an ending for the selection within small groups. Compare each groups' ending.

Discuss the various endings. Which were the most feasible?

Illustrate the selection you chose.

4. COMMERCIALS-- Sell your favorite product.

Discuss different products on the market.

Write a commercial for your favorite product.

Individually, or with a partner, act out your commercial for the class. (This can be videotaped.)

Read articles on how commercials are made.

Visit a studio filming a commercial.

Interview a cameraman, an advertiser....

5. NURSERY RHYMES-- for all grade levels.

Listen to the rhythm of nursery rhymes on a record.

Create your own "modern" nursery rhyme or add a verse to a familiar rhyme.

Make a nursery rhyme book to share with a younger child.

Pantomime a nursery rhyme with a partner. Can the class guess which one you are doing?

Read a nursery rhyme to your class in a varied (i.e. an old lady, a baby, with hiccups, a martian), let the students try!

6. CREATE A STORY AROUND A THEME - a drink, for example, (milk, lemonade, whiskey, poison, medicine)

List as many drinks as you can.

Describe each drink and your feelings about it.

Pick one drink to write a story about - What happens with your drink? Who drinks it?

With a partner, act out or pantomime your "drink story".

Put each drink idea on a slip of paper. Have volunteers pick one from a hat and improvise a short skit about the drink they chose.

7. DEVELOP AN ANIMAL UNIT

Divide animals into various categories.

Write an animal book using specific adjectives to describe each animal. (i.e. playful puppy, strutting peacock, angry bear, stalking tiger)

Use the descriptions you wrote to pantomime different animals. Can the class guess which animal you are portraying?

Think of a particular animal. Develop a story - real or make believe - about your animal.

Stage a pet show with everyone becoming a different animal.

8. CREATE A PHONE CALL STORY

Document the phone calls made in your house for one week. Who called? Purpose of the call?

Write a phone conversation.

Using two telephones as props, improvise a telephone call.

(Give phone call topics on slips of paper prepared beforehand. i.e. your son just had a serious accident, you just won a contest, your house was robbed, your plane is delayed.)

9. FAMOUS EVENTS - in your lifetime (or in the past)

Establish a class list of events.

Place events on a time line.

Individually, or in small groups, choose an event to research and write about.

Act out scenes from the event you chose.

"Become" the important people who made your event possible. Maintain your character throughout the day. (possibilities may include: Boston Tea Party, The First Thanksgiving, Landing on the moon, Invention of the car... develop with your own curriculum.)

10. WHERE MIGHT I BE? places we know.

Depending on your grade level, this could range from states, to countries, to places in your own town (post office, zoo, grocery store....)

Develop a class list of places.

Write the places on strips of paper. Have individuals or groups describe, or

write the place they chose.

Without telling where you are, describe your surroundings.

Create a pantomime or short skit taking place in "your place".

Additional Creative Dramatics Activities

The following can easily be adapted to your individual language arts program.

Paper Bag Dramatics - place 5 items in a bag, divide into small groups to develop a short skit or story with the items.

Act Out Emotions - how would you feel if?

Fairy Tales - rewrite and compare to original, act out

Pantomime - tongue twisters, opposites, sports events, imaginary trips, animals, careers.....

Birthday Month Skits - act out something that happens in your birthday month

Poetry - act them out, illustrate them

Choral Readings - divide into small groups, each group read parts in unison

Object Acting - bring in one object, have the children develop a skit around it

Charades - write television programs, movies and book titles on slips of paper, Children, pick one and pantomime it for the class to guess.

Toyland - one person is the toymaker, all children in the class become a toy. Guess what they are.

Picture Acting - cut pictures from magazines. Develop a skit using the picture as a story starter.